

# Obliterating African Memory and History: African Archives in Tatters

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This contribution is made from the viewpoint of a user of archives and not an archivist. I am raising an alarm about the state of African archives, in the hope that this will help in rallying support for the rescue of African archives, which over the years have been deteriorating at a rapid pace. There is even the danger that, in some cases, the damage factor has carried on for so long that some of these archives may be largely beyond repair. The dangers lurking in the plight of Africa's archives cannot be understated. The tragedy is that if we allow these dangers to take effect, then on a wide scale, the damage may be certainly unrectifiable. In a way, this alarm is similar to what we frequently hear about the conditions of the fauna and flora on this globe. We are frequently reminded of the many endangered species, both plant and animal, which our rapacious practices have created. To wipe off our collective memory represents a retreat into a new dark age.

Many years ago, in December 1975 to be precise, I discussed this matter with the late Professor Meyer Fortes at Lomé during the

15th International Sociological Association Conference on Family Research. I indicated that in my view Africa's archives, from what I had seen in Uganda during the late 1960s and in Ghana during the early 1970s, suggested to me that if attention and consideration was not directed to the protection and preservation of our archives, then very soon irredeemable damage would be inflicted on this heritage. My idea then was that, with the support of the UNESCO and other interested individuals and institutions, a systematic attempt needed to be made to at least put all the holdings of African archives onto microfiche, which can be held in different places in each instance. Meyer Fortes immediately agreed and suggested that I refer the matter to Professor Vinigi Grottanelli in Italy. Unfortunately, we did not manage to go beyond initial attempts to reach Vinigi Grottanelli. A few years later, in 1980, I discussed the matter again with Meyer Fortes in his twilight and final years in Cambridge. Again we resolved to pursue the matter to a successful conclusion but were unable to find the initial funding for a meeting of minds to look into the matter. It has,

however, been a matter which has persistently dogged my memory and which has resurfaced in the form of this contribution.

Compared to other principal areas of the global community which have collections of literary and related records, stored for future generations of interested parties, Africa has, in this respect, for various reasons, the most limited heritage. The main reason for this is that the tradition of literacy in Africa is generally of relatively recent vintage. While it is not possible to generalise about the tradition of literacy in Africa, it is possible to say that for most parts of Sub-Saharan Africa literacy and writing has been accomplished over the last very few hundred years under the aegis of missionary groups. Africa, it is often boasted, is the global heartland of orality. Knowledge and a collective memory of Africans have been passed on to successive generations through oral traditions. The institutions around which orality in Africa has from time immemorial been consolidated have been the subject of interesting and persistent research over the past century, and sometimes there has been a tendency amongst some scholars to glorify orality at the expense of its serious limitations.

As earlier said, in comparison to the other major civilisational areas of the human community, which have collections of historically accrued literature, Africa has, in this respect, for various reasons, the most restricted legacy. The foremost reason for this is that the tradition of literacy in Africa is for most parts of the continent relatively young. It is important not to overstate the point about the paucity and limitedness of a literature culture in Africa, especially of the kind which predates the colonial experience. Berry has summarised the facts about these languages. Adaptations of the Arabic script have been used to render into writing some of these

languages. Versions of the Arabic like *ajami* have been used extensively in the Western Sudan. *Ajami* refers to languages other than Arabic which have been written in the Arabic script. They included Swahili, Bambara-Malinke, Kanuri, Hausa, and Fulani.

Ethiopic, a language directly derived from one of the root languages of the world, Afro-Asiatic, and written in a Semitic script, continues to be used to write Ge'ez, Tigrinya and Amharic. The classical Greek script has been used in the rendition of Old Nubian and Coptic. There are also some indigenously inspired scripts. Tifinagh, the script of the Berber peoples of North Africa, including the Tuareg, has now fallen into disuse. As a written form of literary composition, its use was limited, but in historical experience, its existence gave rise to a small class of literati. A Somali script called *Osmania* was developed by Ismadu Yusuf Keradi. The rather limited Vai alphabet developed by Momadu Bukele (Morrison gives another name, Dualu not Bukele) in the 1830s, apparently still enjoys some popularity amongst the Vais. Some other West African languages like Mende, Kpelle, Loma and Bassa have scripts of more recent vintage inspired by the Vai syllabary. The Bamum script developed by King Njoya of the Southern Cameroons was initially structured as a logographic system. It later evolved through the agency of royal edicts into a syllabary and then into a more definitive alphabet. There is also the particularly interesting case of Oberi Okaime, a language which was created by members of a millenarian sect based in the village Ikpa in the Itu Division of Calabar Province in 1931. There is no evidence that the language and script survived beyond the 1930s.

Historical records point to the fact that from the early years of the western encounter,

indeed from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, some literature has been steadily produced on African affairs in Africa at the western trading posts and forts in West Africa. The Portuguese, who established the earliest western presence, were responsible for the earliest western records and evidence of this can be found in Portuguese archives. Later, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Dutch generated literature on Africa, some of which still remains in South Africa, and a good part is held in Dutch archives, particularly the *Rijks Archief* in the Hague. The French have likewise contributed to this corpus. But most of the materials that were produced in Africa have not survived. For a variety of reasons, one of which being climatic conditions, another being insensitive and inappropriate storage methods, and possibly a third reason being the lack of sufficient premium placed on such materials, there is precious little left of such Africa-based materials. Almost all the archival materials on Africa of significance are stored and kept in European and North American archives.

Much of the records that we have of Africa today arises out of the colonial interlude of African history and is therefore, for the most part, not older than a century. African archives hold the bulk of these materials. What has been generated and stored in African archives since the beginning of the post-colonial era appears to have been unsystematically assembled, with major gaps and flaws in these holdings. Comparative African records covering the same period in Europe and North America are so much better kept that, limited as they are, they are increasingly becoming the centre of gravity of African archival records.

In my experience of African archives in Ghana, Uganda, Kenya, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, Sudan and South Africa, without

doubt the best of these are South Africa, Botswana and Namibia. Ironically, these are societies which have been stable economies enjoying a fair degree of buoyancy, and which have excellent infrastructure for the storage, preservation and retrieval of archival materials.

In most of Africa it would appear that as economic conditions deteriorate, the archives also suffer grievously. It is close to impossible to get people to care for archival materials in societies where daily bread is continuously in question. I vividly recall that in Cape Coast, Ghana, during the early seventies, some archival materials found their way onto the streets as wrapping paper for peanut/groundnut sellers. In Uganda, Ghana, Zambia and the Sudan, precious archival materials were strewn over the floor, with some gathering veritable dust. In the Sudan, in Juba in particular, archival material was also used for wrapping foodstuff and that which was stored in the so-called archives was to some extent exposed to the elements.

In Juba, there was a disturbing case of an American scholar who carted off large holdings during the early 1980s to his house in Juba town, and then on through Nairobi to the United States, with the excuse that he was in a much better position to preserve these holdings. War and conflict in Africa constitute one of the most important destabilising factors for African archives (amongst other things). The Sudanese civil war has done possibly irreparable damage to the archives in the south of the country.

All in all, with the steadily deteriorating circumstances of African economies, and with archives low on the priority list of African governmental authorities, African archives are deteriorating at a fast rate. If urgent attention is not paid to this the historical memory and

legacy of Africa will be enormously damaged and largely obliterated. The collective amnesia which Africans have about their societies and history will then continue.

It would be useful for the African Union, UNESCO, selected research institutions and universities, and perhaps a cohort of African

academics and senior bureaucrats to create a body tasked with the comprehensive investigation of the current status of African archives. This commission can then, within a year, come up with firm and manageable recommendations on how to proceed. The time for this is now, not tomorrow.